Dwelling in Political Landscapes

Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by
Anu Lounela, Eeva Berglund and Timo Kallinen

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Editorial Office
SKS
P.O. Box 259
FI-00171 Helsinki
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Anu Lounela, Eeva Berglund, Timo Kallinen

Eeva Berglund
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0269-562X

Troubled landscapes of change: Limits and natures in grassroots urbanism

Introduction: The city as a landscape of alternative politics

Seeking above all to make sense of the fraught politics of contemporary urban change, this chapter is informed by grassroots urban activism and, looking towards anthropology, by the socialised concept of landscape developed in this volume. Anthropology's interest in phenomenological research approaches and 'lived experience' could be put to good use in analysing the kinds of technologised, right-angled (or almost) surroundings in which most of us (have to) dwell: cities and towns.

Granted, there is something counter-intuitive about approaching the city, long associated with modern machines, through phenomenological lenses. Urban life is not obviously akin to the embodied, organically embedded and slowly meandering experiences highlighted in the anthropological landscape literature, which builds on Tim Ingold's extensive and influential work. Besides, as the physical footprints of (some) cities today grow with unprecedented ferocity, attention is grabbed rather by physical constructions and the struggles over open space, housing, ecosystems and infrastructures that follow. Nature's zigzags, as Ingold has shown (2013: 137) do offer theoretical insight, but life for most of us has long unfolded amidst the more engineered geometries of the city (Berglund 2011). In a discussion of landscape, it is important to recall that people are at home also in towns and cities, often also enjoying the quintessential pleasures of urban life. This is not just in famously dynamic cities like New York City, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin or London, whose trajectories have informed urban policy the world over. Alas, having tried to emulate their apparent success, many cities are now troubled by the ways everyday life and entertainments, not to mention homes, fetch increasingly eye-watering prices, while the scale and appearance of new construction defy convention, taste and often public legitimacy.

Projections of urban growth suggest that also environments beyond them will continue to be made over to the intensifying requirements of economically dynamic, cities: mega-dams, artificial islands, mountain-top removal, fracking and so forth. This frenzied remaking of landscapes follows on from European fossil-fuel-driven harnessing of 'hinterlands' for industry, and earlier waves of innovation that so dramatically altered

solar-based landscapes around the world (Mitchell 2011). The unending economic growth associated with these processes is no longer so clearly on the horizon though. Rather, hydrocarbons, climate and economics mix in historically new ways that defy political imaginations. And so, other futures are being anticipated and built, as cities around the world witness a growing phenomenon of low-budget but intellectually and technically ambitious alternative Do-It-Yourself (DIY) practices.

As a sympathetic observer, I see these practices as opening up spaces for radically different technological and environmental futures. As well as expressing preferences about them, anthropologists can and must critically analyse these processes. Fortunately, the anthropological concept of landscape[1] is helpful as it highlights the social character of the environment, both where it seems stubbornly resistant to human action (as nature) and where it is artificial (technologically complicated or capital intensive). The concept of landscape is surprisingly useful for approaching urban change and its troubles today.

Landscape is an ordinary yet complex word that resonates across many different conversations. In work centred on mostly remote and even quiet places, anthropology has understood landscape to be "beyond land" (Árnason et al. 2012), experienced in movement and perception and generating togetherness as well as separation. Urban landscapes too display similar dynamics, being textured by social practices that persist over time, and harbouring sensuousness, open-ended creativity and contingency. Like non-urban landscapes, cities too set the conditions of life and establish constraints on action and on choice itself (Kirkman 2009; Easterling 2016), while structuring groupings of people and their things, and inviting their inhabitants' heightened attention. Cities are layered with symbols and technical apparatuses of different kinds and periods, they may be alienating in various ways, yet for all that, they can still be home.

This chapter seeks to make a theoretical point about the pertinence of anthropological approaches to landscape in cities, but this needs to be approached through specifics. My example is the Finnish capital Helsinki where I was born and where I have again been living, researching and engaging in a range of urban initiatives, with different levels of intensity, for almost ten years now. Helsinki is now a little over a decade into what the city has itself branded the biggest construction boom in a century, a process presented as the only right response to the incontestable pressures of our times. But many see this trajectory as disastrous, particularly in environmental terms, as well as in producing new social inequalities. Building on this opposition, I posit two contrasting ways of imagining and practicing, but also planning, landscapes. Both arise out of urban experience and both involve the relative privilege of planning for a future. At one extreme is an intensification of

1 See introduction: an experience of movement, a shared category, a target of political projects and a memory bank. Also, following geographer Kenneth Olwig, a body politic substantively enfolded within a geography. Our understanding of landscape "cannot focus on the country or the city, but must incorporate the mutual definition and relations of both" (Olwig 1996: 45).

a detached landscape building that originated in the generic, fast-growing, city of industrial capitalism with its organisation based on "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998). At the other extreme is a more or less self-conscious working against this legacy, namely grassroots urbanism and particularly urban gardening. Specific sociotechnical and political histories are always key to shaping landscapes, but painting with a broad brush, Helsinki appears rather typical in the dominance of internationalism in architecture and commerce, standardised infrastructures and global metrics of success. At the other pole, countering this, are forms of grassroots urbanism, also familiar from around the world that build on social media and ideals of global environmental sustainability. Both the mainstream and the alternative are part of global circuits of many kinds, including somewhat abstract technical knowledge. I argue that like scientific authority, this participation informs how city dwellers perceive, produce and inhabit their surroundings, that is, their landscapes.

Like previous social movements, today's grassroots or DIY urbanism is an emergent and often influential force on the urban stage, and as before, it creates spaces for exploring and not simply rejecting technoscience (e.g. Berglund and Kohtala, forthcoming). This notwithstanding, it is also a way of bringing nature into the city. Whether as food production, anarchist inspired nocturnal (usually) acts of city beautification or gatherings of people experimenting across a range of alternative practices and values, these often informal and collective initiatives for urban change are both cause and effect of socio-technical as well as politico-epistemic change, as anthropologists (Estalella and Corsin-Jimenez 2016) and others (e.g. the sustainable design pioneer Ezio Manzini [2015]) have noted. This is not quite protest or resistance, rather, it is an effort to construct or prefigure a different world, as the snappy Zapatista slogan long ago aptly put it.[2] As a type of activism, it has shifted the focus of environmentalist critique toward cities, which though full of artifice and modern hubris, are no longer inimical to environmental agendas, quite the opposite.[3]

The myriad practices of remaking urban environments to better suit uncertain futures are endlessly fluid and self-consciously creative (Rosa and Weiland 2013; Bialski et al. 2015),[4] but tend to seek a reattachment or re-enchantment with practical activity and the human scale. This sensibility is usually guided by respect for limits somewhere. Whereas incumbent ideologies and dominant economic sectors like finance and construction and even mainstream environmentalism elide questions of limits (Meadowcroft 2013), activism questions the mainstream's desire for economic growth and its assumed benefits, even where activists are not anti-capitalist as such.

2 At the turn of the millennium, the slogan was often heard: "Another world is possible!" It was attributed to Mexico's Zapatistas, now recognised as a key inspiration for alter-globalisation and anti-capitalist actions around the world.

3 This is not the place to labour a clear definition or typology. The phenomenon is dynamic and the literature is fast growing, some listed below.

4 They can also have perverse effects, and examples of green agendas unwittingly or intentionally supporting standard neoliberalisation abound (e.g. Checker 2011).

Whether bolstered by scientific authority or not, in the older language of 'limits to growth' or recent calls to respect planetary boundaries (Jackson and Webster 2016), a notion of nature as limits somewhere fuels their commitment. Not waiting for government, business or other agencies to do it for them, urban initiatives are prefiguring tomorrow's world today, combining social and ecological critiques into new repertoires of action. This is so even where activism involves beneficiaries of contemporary capitalism, 'creatives' and professionals (or not-quite-professionals) of many kinds. In fact today's urban activism connects the (still) comfortable city life with troubles elsewhere (whether close by or distant) that enable it. They are acutely aware of – and often distraught by – proliferating global assemblages spawning endless wicked problems whose adverse effects are getting closer to 'us' in time and space. Whereas decision makers and academics appear oblivious to limits and limitations, for activists these realities loom large though vague.

An anecdote illustrates the point. One day in spring 2016, I found myself in a dispiriting but not surprising conversation with a young (then under 30) activist I know, who was setting up a new urban garden for Helsinki residents to learn about local edible plants. We had both attended a one-day symposium on environmental policy for researchers and practitioners. The event had been premised on the increased urgency of an all-encompassing shift away from a resource intensive economy. She was scathing about the speakers, several of whom I count as friends and colleagues, and then did an imitation of the day's "blah, blah, blah" -level of discourse that made me cringe as well as laugh. Having recently graduated from university, she had attended the event in the hope of finding inspiration for an educational project. After we parted I felt deeply saddened. Since my first meeting with her six years earlier, she had been doing urban gardening and promoting sustainable energy, either as a volunteer or poorly paid project worker. Compared to all that, however, the environmentalism of those of us at the symposium, those with power – she guessed – was hyped up but constrained and lacking in intellectual merit let alone anywhere near the political force required. Ouch! She is not averse to a little gentle civil disobedience, like many activists of her age in Helsinki, but she is not a protester and hardly militant. Rather, she is a do-er, a team player impatient for massive social change. With another summer season of urban gardening over, she was once again looking for work.

As they turn their backs on – or are denied – conventional capitalist aspirations, activists are not, though, heading in droves to the backwoods (or deserts) to establish eco-villages or other back-to-the-land initiatives as was the case 50 years ago. They are making space in the city, from their own starting points but enmeshed in others' projects, not least large-scale construction. If not protestors, they are social critics. Indeed, starting from mundane experiences of cities designed for some activities more than others, activist researchers have been scathing critics of fast-growing industrial cities since at least the 19th century, and even more so, of the sprawling and car-based cities since. In this frame, my friend at the symposium is an activist-researcher of the city, not unlike Lewis Mumford (e.g. 1938) and

Jane Jacobs (e.g. 1961) in the mid-twentieth century and Richard Sennett (e.g. 1996) and others since. These writers' complaint that the experts (planners particularly) are not up to the task allocated to them is as old as the professions themselves, as is their observation that greed for money and power corrupts city politics. They have specifically drawn attention to the way that conventional, politically powerful, thought has allowed – or erected – a chasm between the city and the wider socio-ecological world beyond. Not unlike phenomenologically inspired landscape research, their work has highlighted everyday feelings and doings, as well as standardised technologies, as what makes up the city.

Spectacle as disembedded landscape

The dominant urban imaginaries of the last two-plus hundred years, have been rather different. In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams (1973) brilliantly traced the rise of bourgeois images and understandings of the city and how they captured the imagination and obedience of modern or would-be modern audiences. In an analysis based on London but relevant beyond it, he showed that while the mutual dependencies between what became known as centres and peripheries actually became more intense, their supposedly essential differences became exaggerated and reified in ideologically informed representations. Metropolitan self-delusion, extending to belief in the superiority of city life and people, was made possible in part by disembedded, detached conceptions of rural landscapes contrasted with the city. The modern period's re-arrangement of socio-natural life prioritised the image – the picturesque, the scenic, the deftly composed and pleasing prospect – over the material and intensely experienced struggles that actually produced this epoch-making change. If Williams concentrated on poetry and literature, other authors have drawn our attention to the image as, literally, pictures (Cosgrove 1983).

As the twentieth century saw the expansion and acceleration of consumer-led capitalism, such detached images increasingly took the form of spectacle. This, at least, was a key argument among the Situationist International, whose anti-establishment and militantly convivial protests in mid-twentieth-century Paris still inspire urban activists.[5] At issue was not just the penetration of capitalism into our innermost experience. The Parisian critics posited an image-saturated social system where alienation is total, but they were also critical of the destruction of our physical world too: post-war Paris experienced mass expulsions, distressing demolitions and vast rebuilding projects (Pinder 2005: 137).

Such a literal yet extreme polarisation of landscapes into centre and periphery has only intensified in recent decades. Iconic leisure or ecology-oriented landscapes (see the chapters by Mölkänen and Järvi in this book) have become entrenched and enclosed, often emptied of the people whose activities substantially shaped the attractions that now draw in tourists

5 As elaborated upon in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967.

and settlers. With just that perversion in mind, William Cronon (1995) dubbed these "the wrong nature". At the other end of this notionally centre-periphery spectrum, are mono-functional central business districts (CBDs). The absolute extreme may be the decidedly fictional skyscraper cities of advertising, for instance the island of thrusting architecture that promoted the (not unreasonable) idea that "we live in *Financial Times*" in an advertising campaign in 2007.[6] Like the modern city of capitalism, the city of the twenty-first century also thrusts upwards from privately owned land and enjoys a reputation as the seat of progress and novelty. However, now city governments also operate as if exempt from temporal, spatial and social limits, and even from accountability to their residents (Easterling 2016).

The fantasy of a global evolutionary trajectory to wealth remains astonishingly tenacious. This is so even though it is now possible (in some quarters) to ponder on the end of global economic growth (Frase 2016). Dogged commitments to growth are arguably driven by urban experiences: paradigmatically consumerist and aspirational, capital-intensive and mediated through such imagery. We now have the alienating spectacle of 19th and 20th century modernity in super-turbo-over-drive, an aesthetic for the epoch-making intensification of both the extractive industries and waste-processing that deal with the excrement or 'externalities' of this mode of economy on the other. The city is disconnected in thought from its hinterlands even as landscapes are produced as conservation areas, traditional villages, mining concessions, industrial-scale agriculture and aquaculture, topologies that only deepen existing complex forms of interdependence and vulnerability. All that there is, is ever more clearly and consciously the result of human design if not shared human benefit. Meanwhile, though knowledge of spatial interdependencies grows, a further polarisation unfolds: gargantuan corporate entities and hyper-wealthy families tear away from most people's lives and certainly from the grassroots capillary actions of those squeezed out of central locations or, like many activists, just outraged by this.

Mega-projects and DIY-projects jostle for space in cities almost everywhere. Helsinki, long presented as human scale and nature loving, offers a not untypical illustration of how such troubling change prompts contrasting responses[7]. The urban gardening hub I discuss below, is one of several initiatives that have offered a low-threshold entry for people to try their hand at self-organised activism. Since 2012 it has been engaging with the future of the city from a greenhouse built into a former railway turntable,

6 As explained on an online forum for the creative industries, (http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/ accessed December 2018): "World business in one place is depicted with an island containing recognizable business buildings from all over the world, including the Jim Mao Building and Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, Arche De La Defence in Paris, Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, IFC 2 in Hong Kong, Shurfit-Stone Building in Chicago, Commerzbank Tower in Frankfurt, New York Stock Exchange, Taipei 101, The Gherkin in London, TransAmerica Pyramid in San Francisco, Landmark Tower in Yokohama".

7 It is possible for these contrasting modes to co-exist, e.g. when mega-projects include DIY-elements.

raised beds surrounding it, and former office and service buildings to house small-scale operators in typical post-industrial occupations (like social entrepreneurs, architects, designers) to use as performance spaces and indoor leisure. All this exists here cheek by jowl with an enormous regeneration scheme (www.uusipasila.fi/) projected to construct approximately 183 000 square metres of new floorspace in a cluster of high-rises for shopping, office uses, transport and residential development on a scale never before seen in Helsinki.

Agreeing with activists (and many others), I see this as an overproduction of spaces – or landscapes as I am suggesting – that serve commerce and narrow down the space of other operations. They are defined by infrastructures that are convenient to pass through rather than dwell in, that extract rather than reproduce and whose maintenance and replacement is out of local hands. Meanwhile little is achieved to alleviate chronic shortages of other things (time, green, air, attention). As activists' journey in their altered landscapes – around ever larger building sites – they face concrete obstacles that, ironically, are presented as serving the common good. Paradigmatically, familiar pedestrian and cycle routes become blocked and lengthened as new roads, buildings and other hard infrastructures appear. Other obstacles faced by city dwellers seeking alternatives are more abstract – a less resource intensive urban fabric and less exhausting life choices that do not compromise biotic processes crucial to sustaining human society – but equally out of reach. Paraphrasing activists,[8] what the mainstream is really offering is not about growth for the future, it is about diminishing it.

Urban activism and its attachments

Activists increasingly talk about how even to try to escape the infrastructures of the contemporary 'successful' city and its daily routines, is to confront irresolvable contradictions of modernity (Brennan 2000; Fortun 2014). Working through these conundrums is an intellectual journey I too find myself taking, often with anthropologists who are also activists (e.g. Juris 2008; Krøijer 2015). Since 2009 I have been an observant participant in various projects of urban change in Helsinki, getting my hands dirty each summer as an occasional gardener and kitchen help, as well as sitting in meetings, including, for one year, as board-member of Dodo, an environmental organisation strongly identified with Helsinki's urban gardening. Besides a handful of interviews and many conversations with people in other initiatives in Helsinki, my analysis also builds on the rapidly expanding literature – activist, academic and hybrid – ranging from how-to manuals to critical analysis (see also Berglund 2017). Restricting my focus here to loose groupings with practical aims, I discern important similarities among them that are also found in this literature: activists share an often unspoken yet strongly felt imperative to act (Williams 2008; Krøijer 2015) and are self-conscious about futures being matters of choice, as plural. In

8 https://kaantopoyta.fi/manifesti/#intro (in Finnish), accessed November 2018.

what follows, I argue that those I know best reattach with the city, contrasting their sensibilities with the global reach of the mainstream that I modelled above. I argue further, that they nurture a feeling for limits – vague but consequential – again, something that those attaching to global circuits of finance and spectacle evade.

'They' are a mixed bunch, of course (see e.g. Bialski et al. 2015), variously influenced by mainstream politics and middle-class morals, but also by 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Allier 2002), 'environmental justice' (Checker 2011) and anti-austerity mobilisations (Estalella and Corsín Jímenez 2016) and even radical left politics (Krøijer 2015). Traces of environmentalist concern are ubiquitous though in contemporary cities North and South, offering an abundance of examples from what S. Ravi Rajan and Colin A. M. Duncan (2013) refer to as small "mutinies" (2013, 70) and "ecologies of hope". Hazier on detail, William Connolly (2013) writes of more or less hesitant "role experiments" impelled by experiences of neoliberalism, micro-level responses to the fragility of the ecologies that all humans now inhabit. Whatever their political positioning, such people value nature through practical action.

Three typical features of grassroots urbanism will help show how it works towards (re)attachment and perhaps even re-enchantment with a landscape understood in the anthropological sense outlined in the introduction to this book. The three characteristics discussed, though emergent and diffuse, are given further shape by a respect for limits – a nature – elsewhere. The increasing confidence to signal limits is significant as well as novel, although it does continue long-standing critiques of the way modern society despoils the environment. The first characteristic I want to discuss is valuing and protecting what exists; the second, a desire for learning; the third is sharing, particularly food.

Valuing what exists, grassroots urbanism typically operates along the grain of older layers of a city, seeking not to replace, but to reclaim and care for, what is already there. Although commentators, whether activist, academic or other, tend to emphasise how grassroots-initiated new public spaces, gardens for food or pleasure, educational and health projects enliven social and community networks (e.g. Hickey 2012; Rosa and Weiland 2013), each initiative is usually also a re-use, a repurposing of an artefact. The social centres and info shops of radical and autonomist politics in cities around Europe are also examples of physical spaces created cheaply and sustainably, often squatted. Putting value on what exists can also be practiced in relation to actual buildings. These change almost imperceptibly slowly but also need to be maintained and cared for. Thus enfolded into human attentions and actions, buildings then also become part of people's sense themselves. When it comes to thinking about shared heritage, grassroots urbanism can thus align in interesting ways with broadly speaking conservative politics.

An example of how re-use and heritage combine in activism with building anew is beautifully written up by Cindy Kohtala and Andrew Paterson (2015), two design activists (although at the time they would not have used the title themselves) who were involved in the so-called *Oxygen Room* in Helsinki in the early 2000s. This was a pavilion and greenhouse that became

the centre of alternative design art and urban culture. Though technically rather centrally located, the initiative was set up in the margins – derelict land awaiting development – by relatively privileged city residents (primarily a women's network and a group, o2 Finland, promoting sustainable design and architecture). It was built from windows that the city had discarded from its own winter gardens. Although the structure was only supposed to be temporary, it hosted exhibitions, practical workshops and other events exploring different way of creating futures for seven years until development projects caught up with the plot. The construction was dismantled in 2007 and the site now houses office, residential and cultural buildings. In their essay, the authors compare the feel of the *Oxygen Room* to another greenhouse pavilion, mentioned above, the *Turntable* that was built in a disused railway turntable with funds from Helsinki's World Design Capital project in 2012. "Like [the *Oxygen Room*], it is located by the railway tracks, it too has plants, vegetables and herbs, inside and out. It too bridges art, design and urban agriculture with ideals of living with greater ecological consciousness" (Kohtala and Paterson 2015: 70). Contemplating its aesthetic and ethic makes the authors nostalgic for the now vanished *Oxygen Room*. Their nostalgia is tempered, however, with a tenacious drive to learn.

This brings me to the second feature of grassroots action I wanted to highlight, learning and strengthening expertise, also picked up on in anthropologists' analyses of activism (Estalella and Corsín Jiménez 2016). Initiatives like the *Turntable* literally seek to build different tomorrows through building differently or nurturing new or new-old skills like climate-friendly food preparation and preservation. Whether they are cooking, gardening, rigging up sustainable energy supply or working on any of the climate-friendly and small-scale initiatives that have spun out of the Turntable, participants are generally aware of using their intellectual resources.

One concrete practice that typifies urban initiatives is workshops where people learn by doing. Building and furniture-making workshops are a common practice that punctuates the lives of many grassroots urban initiatives, drawing attention to skills but also directly addressing the destructive material flows on which modern cities depend. The workshop is a place and time that brings both the past and future into the present through collective, possibly experimental activities. Learning events including workshops are a staple of Helsinki's *Turntable*. This is a product of a longer-term initiative, *Dodo* (www.dodo.org), which was set up in the mid-1990s as Finland's first explicitly urban environmental organisation. Its founders wanted practical change but it was definitely born of learning and talk. It is similar to many social movements throughout modern history, in that its origins lie in small meetings of friends reading together. Indeed, despite the public image of grassroots urbanism being all about creating practical change, most initiatives I know, in Helsinki and elsewhere, have strong roots in some kind of self-education, an urge to replace or complement what mainstream schooling has offered with alternative pedagogies. Alongside learning about sustainability and efforts to behave sustainably, activist networks seek to enhance their knowledge about policy, planning and political processes.

These arenas are matters of design and artifice rather than the organic unfoldings of nature, but as activists engage with and attach themselves to their surroundings, they engage with these more technocratic domains quite fluently. And abstract practices like communicating online, informing oneself about climate science or alternative technologies, combine rather easily with more hands-on practices, like re-using materials or repurposing open urban space. I argue this is analogous to or at least continuous with landscape anthropology's myriad examples of activities that enfold social life within land, materials and meanings and vice versa, in temporal rhythms.

Skills and expertise thus bump along together, and it is fair to say that participants often say they value doing and making over talking. The challenge is to ensure that skills not be 'enclosed' along with other resources and monopolised. Not everyone is considered an expert, but the prefigurative politics of grassroots activism is a way of developing everybody's potential and capacities. Within a wider neoliberal context where skills and learning have become 'resources' that individuals 'invest' in, a shift to something different that is experimental, DIY, accessible and remunerated poorly if at all, is bound to be ambivalent. Still, with other elements of activist practice, these explorations feed alternative ways of being a person and cultivating an accepted identity. This can also give an uncomfortable sense to learning: it is not understood as schooling but as an aspect of being human that is losing its social value.

A third feature of activism to highlight is sharing, particularly of food. No matter what the material or political goals of a grouping, grassroots urbanists everywhere eat together and so create community. Even when an initiative is not primarily concerned with the politics of food – as most urban gardening initiatives are – they often have some kind of kitchen. The rhythmic anarchy of the grassroots urbanists' kitchen can be encountered From Helsinki to Berlin, Budapest and Rio de Janeiro and beyond. Besides repurposed parts of buildings, the pizza oven and the dry toilet – designed for capturing a key resource rather than flushing it out of sight as useless and troublesome waste – are elements of an international repertoire of grassroots urbanism that shows little sign of disappearing. Sanitised versions have been co-opted for commercial purposes.

Sharing is morally valued and has significant economic implications and it shapes the quality of social interaction in these groups with their strong orientation away from the acquisitive individualism considered the norm in contemporary, economy-driven society. Sometimes this sharing mentality dovetails with critical political reactions to capitalism after the economic chaos of 2008, but sharing can be apolitical in tone (Berglund 2017). Whether projects are driven by more or less utopian hopes for a better future or by the need to compensate for the loss of state or other social support systems (most initiatives address multiple issues simultaneously anyway), they foster an alternative sense of ownership – both literal and psychological – closer to the idea of the 'commons'. This is a concept as well as a practice that activists are developing intellectually, alongside 'sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality' and 'care'. The extent to which participants seek to spell out or elaborate these underlying motivations varies hugely. However, there is

a broad mutual understanding of a need for social and material life to be organised without the enclosures of commercial or state institutions. Using the word 'commons' as a verb, 'commoning' or 'making the commons' thus captures much of the ethos and underlying motivation of these new urban initiatives.

Marginal though it is, this diffused activist work presents itself as more hopeful, less pointless, than a politics of talk – recall my activist friend's views on the vacuous talk of environmental policy. But it is hard and contradictory. As Helfrich and Bollier (2015: 75) put it, initiatives "generally are not based on money, legal contracts, or bureaucratic fiat, but on self-management and shared responsibility". At least these are ideals to which they aspire even if in practice it is often difficult to reach them. Often they find themselves seeking leases on buildings and collaborating with big NGOs or local governments. Of course, even when they succeed in their aims, however small, by establishing something new, making their presence felt or even achieving temporary notoriety, the political impact of any individual urban initiative usually remains weak. Indeed, many activists (and not just in Finland) deny having ambitions to make a political difference, even though they highlight the urgency of total social change. Overt explanations aside, compared to protest events involving large numbers of people that create new and often strong forms of agency (Juris 2008; Krøijer 2015), the longer term sustained work involved in urban initiatives draws its power from more diffuse sources. It has to be sustained against not very good odds in a complex context of many different and competing claims on people's energies and allegiances. Treating developers, municipal offices or the police as adversaries, does not really help, so flexibility and compromises are in frequent demand.

Activists are often eloquent about how resources can be managed without bureaucratic and centralised power, partly thanks to Elinor Ostrom's (e.g. 2009) Nobel prize-winning work on common resource management. This can give them leverage, particularly where their project involves designing alternatives to dominant economic practices, for instance in co-operatives or time-banks. But it is self-organising and horizontality that hold particular attraction among activists. This is underscored by recent anthropological literature (Juris 2008; Graeber 2009; Krøijer 2015) that demonstrates how productive self-organising can be and, through activist research, perhaps strengthens its cultural if not (yet) institutional traction in wider society. Decision making may be less speedy and efficient through 'horizontal' or self-organising processes, but it appears to be superior to 'vertical', voting-based practices in holding people's allegiances and commitments. Rules exist and are learned, through trial and error, but also by explicit coaching. Here the role of workshops is key, putting skills and materials together with people and their aspirations. Of course, it takes far more than sharing food or workshops to sustain voluntary commitment, and the tensions of governing initiatives are a perennial topic in activist groups as in the literature (Berglund and Kohtala, forthcoming). Suffice to mention a well-known urban intervention, Campo de Cebada, in Madrid, which has been a platform for a variety of alternative practices, from political meetings and artistic performances to urban gardening and architectural experiments.

Documented by anthropologists like Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2014) here too, as the initiative grew, both politically and materially, the strictly horizontal principles of decision making associated with protest came increasingly into tension with the need for stability. Indeed, "self-organisation beyond a certain scale is painfully difficult" (McGuirk 2014).

This view is easy to endorse. However, though sometimes painful and often peripheral, the work of activists produces and reproduces not just social groups but landscapes. My argument is that activism gathers things and people together to care for and reflect on them in all their interdependencies, vague as these may be. Self-organised or DIY urbanism can certainly not guarantee change or sustainability, all it can do is continue its work in progress, inhabiting the landscapes it is working on.

The idea of limits

My argument is premised on the idea that urban life too is 'lived experience'. I have also suggested that decisions about urban change are largely pursued through a spectacular imaginary that detaches everything: the investor from the fabric and frictions of his investment, abstract profit from places to live, and so on, and ignores or disavows limits to human endeavour. My illustration was how the city of Helsinki has promoted capital-intensive, commercially driven development oriented to global concerns, while activism has sought to re-attach or re-embed life in material circuits and social processes closer to hand.

I think this is captured in the anthropological landscape concept. It points to the activities but also of actors that constitute our dwelling places. Landscape in this sense is definitively not cultural image or symbol alone, but nor is it natural substrate for life let alone scientific, impersonal, fact. As something that people care about, it is folded into decisions taken by groups, that is, politics, even as it is animated by non-human forces, making it not so much spatial as spatiotemporal. Landscape gathers into itself sociability that remains hidden – ties and the agents they bind – and points to material processes and political decisions unfolding together. Such processes, furthermore, involve not just phenomena close by or available to sensuous experience (as emphasised in phenomenological research traditions), they include circuits of things and ideas that, like 'the market', travel the world in both abstract and concrete forms with both global and local impacts. That is why I have emphasised that learning and abstract information are important in activism just as they are in the construction sector, and further that they too become enfolded in the landscape.

Thus, understanding projects of future building as something that both generates and is generated by landscape need not and should not be limited to the small-scale, technologically and administratively simple or marginal. Building on Ingold's academic insights about landscapes I have suggested that the political and the material, the present and the future, become foci of concern and negotiation in the process of constructing the spectacular cityscapes of our financial times as well. The landscape

concept helps even if it remains, perhaps of necessity, somewhat imprecise. Attaching to what already exists in urban initiatives combines very low-tech with very sophisticated and highly mediated knowledge, as activists also find themselves negotiating surrounding technological infrastructures: (more) hazardous waste deposits, (more) motorways and (more) centralised energy production. Other detailed empirical studies, my own early work for instance (Berglund 1998) or Kim Fortun's ethnography of the Bhopal disaster (Fortun 2001), also show that for urbanites too, experiences of learning are embodied but are often far from the sensuous engagements that anthropology typically foregrounds. Thus attention to institutional politics and technoscientific expertise is a key ingredient of critical engagements with changing landscapes. For if activists care about the things they seek to influence, in part this is due to their scientific literacy and other skills they share with the denizens of urban modernity.

The idea that artifice and human intentions are entangled need not, of course, depend on a concept of landscape. Assemblages and actor networks also foreground the entanglements of the material and the meaningful (McFarlane 2011). In urban studies this has led to developing a vocabulary to draw attention to "small, lateral and almost peripheral changes" (Farías and Bender 2010: 1) and helped to think about the nonhumans and the unfamiliar assemblages that can and do scupper human designs, sometimes in quite dramatic and unwanted ways. Jane Bennett (2005) has inspired this work, for instance the much-cited and evocative example of the black-out that struck North America in August 2003. The difference made by "quirky electron flows to cocky economists' assumptions" (2005: 451) was massive and destructive, the lesson being that political and philosophical attention needs urgently to be paid to places and processes not usually imagined or spoken of as political.

Kim Fortun (2014) writes of late industrialism, with its "natural, technical, political-economic, social, and discursive systems, all of which are aging, often over-wrought, ossified, and politicized" (2014: 310) that are easily rendered banal through a postmodern academic discourse. We may never have been modern, she writes referring to Bruno Latour, but we do have what she calls "a modernist mess on our hands" (Fortun 2014: 312). Dirty industries fuelled by disempowered people service overconsumption even as the concreteness of this human and environmental devastation goes unacknowledged by those who benefit from it. Approached with the vocabularies of assemblages and networks, all urban building projects also appear multiple and inherently unstable even as they shape familiar and meaningful surroundings. Even the most gargantuan projects are assembled from resources and affordances that (despite universal pretentions) fall prey to local resistance and obstruction. In pitting one utopia (endless growth) against another (better futures), grassroots urban initiatives in fact foster an acute sense of these instabilities and they sometimes resist politics as an imperative to grow wealth, money or the so-called economy. They experiment with what can and cannot be done in this place with these resources: soils, seeds and other material inputs, available bodies and forms of expertise, and of course time, energy and the political space and cultural acceptance

to sustain such endeavour. While landscapes of spectacle are landscapes of hubris and speculation that test limits and disavow mutual dependencies, grassroots landscape making is usually the opposite: it works with limits and interdependency very much in mind.

This vague respect for the limits of what is, is taken for granted rather than spelled out. Most of those involved routinely refer to nature or orient themselves towards it. Activists in Helsinki may or may not talk of 'nature' but they do recognise a bundle of forces *not* amenable to human design. This largely implicit reference to limits somewhere on the horizon – and getting closer all the time – needs to be highlighted, since the action is about producing intentional change, which might be misconstrued as a disavowal of limits.[9] It is not necessarily a strong or even explicated notion of what nature might be. In fact, rather than seeking to protect 'nature' or even the 'environment', the challenge activists make concerns potentially everything: as Kim Fortun writes, at issue is the "tight coupling between natural, technical, political-economic, social and discursive systems" (2014: 310). In studying or doing intentional change, the complex relationship between limits and creativity of course never goes away. Nature remains salient, but invoking it signals not so much the inevitable or the normal as much as resistance to human desire and action. If nature constrains, it also makes possible, and it is something to be worked with, learned from and enjoyed.

The anthropogenic dimensions of the systems that people find themselves in also explain why the academic discipline of geography, which was once about rivers, mountains and continents, now appears to be more about Marxism (Lanchester 2016). Anthropology has a similar record of analysing the human and environmental costs of this (neoliberalising) process, training its lens on everywhere that neoliberal logics operate, in short, pretty much anywhere (Ortner 2016). Anthropology therefore deals in landscapes anyway, despite strong traces of an older language of nature and culture.

The contrast between the country and the city has not gone away, but it has changed its meaning. Limits, like boundaries, are very much present everywhere, including the city, and sensed in material and embodied engagement as well as in intellectual debate. Both matter. As urban initiatives test out ways of arranging material, particularly food and waste, their concern is that practices in Helsinki do not rebound in toxic ways on already vulnerable people and places. Put differently, activists attach to their immediate surroundings with planetary limits – however vague – in mind. The landscape of speculation attaches to quite different things.[10]

Casting landscape as a gathering of people and things that is at once social, experiential and, of course, material and not as a representation separate from the thing it refers to, can refocus critiques of urban development on what matters to city folk of many stripes – the world around them, to the side and

9 In contrast, thinking glossed as eco-modernist shares the belief in needing to redesign, confident that technology will come to fix problems, known and as-yet unknown, before it is too late.

10 These attachments are hugely consequential, but have been hard to study as 'lived experience', a situation that I hope is changing.

up, in their dreams and their everyday journeys: in short, in the landscapes they care about. Though my illustration has been Helsinki, there is a general tendency for urban transformation today to be dominated by the rather placeless values and future visions of finance capital. I have drawn attention though to the contestation, which is a also transnational phenomenon. And I have shown, using landscape as empirical as well as theoretical coordinate, the multiple commitments and capacities needed to shape and sustain urban life. Further developing anthropology's landscape concept in urban settings, I believe, would raise more forceful critiques of the city-focussed and image-based hubris, which devastates landscapes anywhere.

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